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Passamaquoddy film opens to praise

Saturday, March 25, 2006 -

CALAIS -- The film, "N'tolonapemek: Our Relatives' Place" drew animated praise from filmmakers Wednesday as it followed the journey of a Passamaquoddy man as he traced the path his ancestors once took along the St. Croix River.

And along the way, the 50-minute film explored 9,000 years of

Passamaquoddy culture along the St. Croix River Watershed.

The film premiered Wednesday at Washington County Community College.

Tribal historian Donald Soctomah of Indian Township, the catalyst behind the film, introduced it. Gunnar Hansen of Southwest Harbor was the film's director. "Gunnar is a Maine filmmaker. He's worked with the tribe on several films. He's worked with the Penobscot on two films. He's worked on the 'Wabanaki New Dawn' which is one of the major films of Maine natives," Soctomah said.

Tribal member Wayne Newell of Indian Township narrated the film. It was dedicated to former Pleasant Point tribal Gov. Melvin Francis, who died earlier this year in an automobile accident.

Soctomah said the film would be part of several American Indian film festivals throughout the country and in the Maritimes. "A lot of our history has not been told," the historian said quietly.

The film begins with Indian Township tribal member Stephen Sabattus looking at the river. "He has a strong presence," Soctomah said quietly.

The film jumps back and forth between the past and the present as it also follows young and old tribal members canoeing the St. Croix River and retracing the steps of their ancestors from their winter home near Indian Township to their summer home at Pleasant Point.

Along the way, Newell talks about what the state identified as Site 96.02 in Meddybemps and what later was discovered to be the site of a Passamaquoddy village.

At the Passamaquoddy village, the dig revealed that men hunted and fished, and women gathered plants and made birch bark containers. Among the artifacts found were hunting instruments, tools and cooking implements.

The film also tells the tale of a 50-year tragedy. For more than half a century, the 5-acre parcel was the dumping ground for military storage containers filled with hazardous materials, as well as salvage scrap metal, miscellaneous debris and old military ammunition.

But then the federal government declared it a Superfund site and during the cleanup an archaeological site that has been called the largest in Washington County and one of the largest east of the Penobscot River was uncovered.

To the Passamaquoddy Tribe, the former toxic waste dump is the home of their ancestors, so the tribal elders have named it "Ntolonapemk" - "My Relatives' Place."

Soctomah and others decided to capture the importance of the Meddybemps village and the tribe's travels on film. "It took about four years to complete all of the filming," he said. "The film took only about 18 months, but the process of doing the paperwork and doing the script took about four years."